now see that de Kooning was always more concerned with making and confronting an image than was Pollock. He worked on a vertical canvas, a surface with a top and a bottom, and several of his abstract paintings of the late 1940s have revealed themselves as compilations of fragmented anatomy. His erotic attachment to the female body became blatant in a series of *Woman* paintings he embarked on in 1950 and first exhibited in 1953, shocking those who associated the New Painting with pure abstract-ness. There is of course no reason why a painter should force himself to exclude all references to the visible world. To do so leads to clichés that are inimical to personal expression, to an act of painting akin to making a signature rather than to ever-new adventures. Pollock too let images back into his work in the 1950s, but de Kooning, one feels, had never wanted to do without them, blatant or latent. His great, slightly appalling images of women, archetypal creatures that are also pre-echoes of the forceful, sexually and politically challenging women of today, belong to the tradition of Rubens as much as to our century—and one recalls that de Kooning had been born in Holland and had studied art in Belgium before emigrating to the USA at the age of 22.

Other painters were drawn into Abstract Expressionism by the excitement and the quality of Pollock's and de Kooning's work. Each one had the task of working without apparent constraints whilst retaining something of a brand image that separated his work from another's. An art associated with wildness proved itself capable of remarkable refinement and variety, in terms of the marks made and the materials used. To this day a roomful of good Abstract Expressionist paintings is an exhilarating environment, even if familiarity has reduced the sense of risk which loomed so large in the 1950s. And if there was astonishing variety within the movement there was also something of a reaction within it, against the emphasis on spontaneity and instinctual action.

By 1950 two Abstract Expressionists had concentrated their activity to something that seemed dangerously minimal. Barnett Newman (1905–70) and Mark Rothko (1903–70) aimed at something beyond personal drama. Newman in 1948 spoke of 'an art that would suggest the mysterious sublime rather than the beautiful', a modern art that would lift mankind into a realm of experience larger than life, a religious or quasi-religious experience. The word 'sublime' is significant. It recalls Romanticism. Both painters achieved such an art by abstract means alone and by the suggestion these could afford. Newman's large flat surfaces of colour, interrupted in their expanse by the vertical
95 caesuras he called his 'zips', offered sensations of cosmic space and cosmic events. Rothko's weightless veils of reticent but glowing colour confront us like apparitions, moments of revelation from the spiritual world. Rothko said, in 1958, that 'all art deals with intimations of mortality'; his own takes us to the frontiers of our world and lets us glimpse something of the world beyond—a mystical experience known to many from particular moments in music but rarely
96 spoken of in connection with art. The size of these paintings announces their importance and carries with it the risk of

emptiness, like a sermon full of high rhetoric but offering only platitudinous thoughts. Their size and the necessity to let each one be seen wholly and without distraction makes them difficult to exhibit, and both painters gave a good deal of thought to this problem. What is unquestionable is the enduring effectiveness of their high-flying art, in spite of the world's increasingly agnostic attitude to questions of heaven and hell.

Critics long continued to comment on Abstract Expressionism in terms of headstrong ventures into the unknown, extremist acts performed without thought of the outcome and its implications, yet it must be clear that this art too had its skills and its controls. In Rothko and Newman these are blatant, and so are they in the work of younger men such as Morris Louis (1912–62) and Kenneth Noland (born 1924). Louis specialised in letting thinned paint soak into unprimed, absorbent canvas, fixing his loose canvas in such a way that gravity would take his colours in the direction he wished them to run. The recipe is simple enough but even 105
Louis's adroit handling of it and his inventive use of scale and, above all, interval cannot quite explain the awe that his best paintings produce in the viewer. Noland has tended to work with geometrical forms that divide his canvases into harmonious colour areas. The Expressionist element in this art is reduced to next to nothing. Noland's surfaces and colours are of great refinement: we are back with the beautiful rather than the sublime, and with a concentration on painting as a matter of arranging colours on a flat surface. 106
They are calm works, and intelligent rather than moving. Their minimalism—flat bands of colour wholly occupying the surface of the picture, without any additional element of accent or gesture—was matched or even trumped in the paintings done by a younger painter in 1960. Frank Stella (born 1936) that year produced a series of monochrome paintings in which the shape of the canvas and the composition of stripes were insistently identical (the stripes even echoing the width of the wood stretcher bars to which the

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81 (opposite) **Frank Stella**. *Zambesi*. 1967. Lithograph. 15 × 22 in. (38 × 56 cm). Lawrence Rubin, New York. With these paintings, at a time when Abstract Expressionism was the great avant-garde event, Stella seemed to silence painting and to turn attention away from stirring emotional effects to question about what a painting is or should be.

90 (right) **Hans Hofmann**. *Still Life – Yellow Table on Green*. 1936. Oil on board. 60 × 44½ in. (152 × 113 cm.). André Emmerich, New York. Hofmann was an impressive painter of abstract pictures, but it was his teaching that was his gift to American art.

91 (below) **Jackson Pollock**. *Number 1*. 1948. Oil on canvas. 68 × 104 in. (172.5 × 264 cm.). Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. (Purchase). The web of lines with occasional patches of paint is markedly linear in effect: we see a luminous thicket of coloured threads, which we follow and half want to unravel. To some extent, we re-enact what the painter did, following the movements of his arm over the large surface.